Battle Command Staff Training for Engineer Commands

By Lieutenant Colonel Ted S. Weaver and Major Patrick J. Farrell

Deploying Reserve Component (RC) headquarters receive postmobilization battle command staff training (BCST), executed by the 75th Battle Command Training Division (75th BCTD) and hosted by a training support brigade (TSB). The exercise director, the TSB commander, is the validating authority. For most deploying RC engineer commands, the 3d Battle Command Training Brigade (3d BCTB) provides this training, and the 181st TSB at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, is the validating authority.

The 3d BCTB trains other types of units as well as engineer battalion and brigade headquarters. On one mission, they may train a mayoral cell, followed by an infantry brigade combat team, then followed by an engineer brigade. It takes a wide skill set to train this variety of units. The brigade has no explicit concentration of military occupational specialties (MOSs), since several or all are needed for most units trained. Battle command tasks are universal to any battalion or brigade, but when training engineers, 3d BCTB is always looking for more MOS 21 series Soldiers. With that in mind, high-quality, mission-focused training is always afforded every unit that the brigade is tasked with preparing for deployment.

All postmobilization battle command training is a team effort. The most important member of that team is the engineer headquarters—the deploying expeditionary force (DEF) unit. The early participation of the engineer unit's commander and staff is essential to shape an effective, well-aimed exercise. Besides the 3d BCTB, essential members of the team include the TSB, the unit in-theater that is being replaced, and potentially additional members of the engineer community.

Battle Command

"Battle command is the art and science of understanding, visualizing, describing, directing, leading, and assessing forces to impose the commander's will on a hostile, thinking, and adaptive enemy. Battle command applies leadership to translate decisions into actions—by synchronizing forces and warfighting functions in time, space, and purpose—to accomplish missions. Battle command is guided by professional judgment gained from experience, knowledge, education, intelligence, and intuition. It is driven by commanders."[1]

"The operations process consists of the major command and control activities performed during operations: planning, preparing, executing, and continuously assessing the operation. The commander drives the operations process. Battle command is at the center of the Operations Process."[2]

Commanders and staffs use the military decision-making process (MDMP) and troop-leading procedures to integrate activities during planning. They also use other processes and activities to synchronize operations and achieve mission success.

Key to Mission Success

The commander of the 181st TSB served as the exercise director of multiple engineer brigade missions executed by the 75th. His training goal when executing BCST is to ensure that members of the DEF unit have a solid understanding of their mission and how they nest into their higher headquarters. He believes that it is a continuation of preparation for the transfer of authority (TOA), and he wants them to walk into the relief in place (RIP) knowing their knowledge gaps and what questions need answers. He also wants them to come to grips now with the specific issues they will face in-theater.

BCST often presents the first time that the full staff of officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) are able to work together doing their daily, tactical jobs in an integrated fashion with all of the staff sections. Many RC engineer units—and route clearance units in particular—arrive at the mobilization site with limited training experience in their new form as a modular force. For example, although the unit may have previous combat experience as a construction force, it may be mobilized for a route clearance mission with subordinate units that are not part of their home-station chain of command.

One example of the benefits derived by client units was given by the executive officer of the 724th Engineer Battalion, Wisconsin Army National Guard. He observed that the command post exercise (CPX) was critical to the growth of his staff. Prior to the experience, they were planning for deployment—but during the CPX, they transitioned to their tactical mission, which made the training highly beneficial.

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A construction management and survey team works with an Iraqi role player through a translator to clarify requirements for a police station design.

The 3d BCTB timeline from receipt of mission to execution of the first event is typically 150 days. After the 3d BCTB conducts its own MDMP, the project officer contacts the TSB. Collaborative planning ensues between 3d BCTB, the TSB, and the DEF unit. Three essential elements that the team must agree to at the outset are the "Road to War" timeline, the exercise line of effort (LOE) framework, and a 3d BCTB seat on the leader's recon.

The timeline puts the key scenario development players in sync. One of the early events is the mission event list (MEL) development conference, at which the DEF unit provides input for the BCST scenario. Questions that are asked are—

- What are the unit's LOEs?

- What are the unit's battle drills?

- What are the commander's training objectives (CTOs)?

- What are some specific issues/events that they want injected into the scenarios?

Answers to these questions become the mission's LOE framework, which guides the writing of the MEL—the series of messages, role playing, and taskers that are delivered to the engineer headquarters during the exercise. The commander of the 181st sees this LOE framework as the centerpiece of any exercise: a "vital diagram" that defines how the unit fits into the higher headquarters plan. Since some LOEs are not easy to understand—for example, supporting governance—this creates dialogue with the unit in-theater.

Forming a Positive Relationship

The DEF units are pulled in many directions when preparing for deployment. From a distance, the postmobilization mission rehearsal exercise (MRX) is just one more of those tasks—and the DEF unit often misses the MEL development conference mentioned above. The 3d BCTB project officer and TSB will make a preliminary assessment of the DEF unit's mission, based on research, and develop a suggested LOE framework and CTOs for discussion.

The commander of the 724th Engineer Battalion said that the support received before a 75th Division exercise demonstrated a commitment to professionalism: The 75th's project officer wanted to work the CTOs into the exercise, which suggested a major recurring theme for a successful exercise—positive relationships. He was also the project officer for eight engineer battalions at Fort McCoy in 2009 and 2010. He keeps in contact with every unit once it deploys and ensures that each one is assisting the unit it will conduct RIP/TOA with at deployment's end. Additionally, he looks a year out, building relationships with units projected to mobilize for deployment.

During the 150 days prior to the engineer brigade mission, the 3d BCTB project officer (a lieutenant colonel) is in weekly contact with the DEF unit. His point of contact is usually the brigade's chief of staff or executive officer. For battalion missions, the timeline is shorter, and the point of contact is normally the engineer battalion commander or executive officer. The discussions often focus on—

- Updating training objectives to reflect changes in mission.

- Assessing the state of staff training, level of Army Battle Command System training (ABCS), and general expectation management.

The leader's recon to visit the unit in-theater is a key event in the preparation for the MRX. It is imperative for the 3d BCTB to have an officer on this event, which allows the 3d BCTB trainers the time needed to fully understand the mission and challenges that the DEF unit will face. This is the mission realism keystone for the model of training that 3d BCTB develops. It enables a meaningful scenario and realistic role playing of higher, adjacent, lower, supporting, and support (HALSS) units. Perhaps even more important than raw data collection during the leader's recon is that relationships are created with both the DEF unit and the unit in-theater.

The need for relationship-building here is impossible to overemphasize—the unit in-theater is the most credible source of relevant data for the realistic theater model of training. A steady stream of this data is needed during scenario development. A surge of this information provides additional realism during the exercise—often with only hours to acquire it. Without established relationships, the accessible raw data is often without context—and requests for information (RFI) will go unanswered or may be delayed beyond the latest time of value to the detriment of the training. The degree of mission success goes back to the human factor—solid, personal relationships.

This slow turnaround on exercise RFIs is consistently the greatest source of frustration for the DEF unit. Some types of required information are—

- Battle update briefs.
- Intelligence summaries (INTSUMS).
- Current operations orders (OPORDs).
- Fragmentary orders (FRAGOs).
- Operational graphics.
- Mission tracking tools.
- Unit status reports.
- Daily situation reports (SITREPS).

For an engineer brigade, the typical sequence of post-mobilization BCST events is three days of MDMP training, followed by two 3-day CPXs and an 8-day MRX. The battalion sequence is similar; however, a training support battalion will execute a mission rehearsal exercise (MRE). Battalions normally deploy with their subordinate companies, and the MRE incorporates the companies' boots-on-the-ground training mission into the BCST exercise.

MDMP Training—Not a Slide Show

When the war began, 3d BCTB taught MDMP to deploying units in a traditional classroom with 100 PowerPoint slides and a practical exercise based on a National Training Center scenario. This was an adequate model at the time. DEF units arrived at the mobilization station with poor MDMP skills, and this crawl method filled the training gap. For several years now, most units arrive at the mobilization site having basic MDMP skills. They only need a controlled environment, and 3d BCTB's MDMP course coaches them to keep on track through their preparation for deployment.

One method used to train MDMP ensures that the DEF unit does a classified MDMP event on their theater higher unit's OPORD and strengthens the staff's natural roles. The DEF unit produces a *straw man* order of their own. As the DEF unit transitions through the seven steps of MDMP, either the 3d BCTB MDMP facilitator or the DEF unit's chief of staff will give a short PowerPoint-based instruction for that step as a refresher. Since the chief of staff/executive officer is responsible for conducting staff training[3] and is their natural leader, it makes the most sense for the engineer staff to see him driving the process. The facilitator provides the tools: the PowerPoint instructions to introduce each new step in the MDMP process, a suggested timeline, doctrinal references, and hints as necessary.

The *straw man* order is based on both facts and assumptions and will need amendments when the unit gets into theater, but it is supposed to be the 75 percent solution. It also forces the engineer staff sections to develop their running estimates, lengthen the list of RFIs, and understand the fundamental baseline of their mission. In the process, the unit's ability to conduct MDMP is considerably sharpened, while the natural roles within the staff are strengthened.

The chief of staff for the 16th Engineer Brigade was pleased with this method of MDMP training, the success of which he attributed to having the 3d BCTB MDMP team and the senior mentor with them every step of the way.

Mission-Focused Staff Integration

The basic pattern for the CPX and MRX is the same. Messages come into the command post in a variety of ways—e-mail, instant messaging over the classified "closed-loop" network, Secure Voice Over Internet Protocol (SVoIP) telephone, live role players, or frequency-modulated (FM) radio. Yet another method is over the Command Post of the Future (CPOF). Battalions use Blue Force Tracker during their CPX and MRE. As the battle staff is working these issues, reacting to battle drills, exercising their standing operating procedures, and receiving and submitting reports, the higher headquarters sends down major taskers relating to missions that the unit is expected to execute when deployed. These taskers may require additional analysis through MDMP. Units brief their products to role-played VIPs—often division and corps staff. Simultaneously, there are competing mobilization requirements. These may include new equipment fielding, crew-served weapons makeup, central issuing facility issue, medical issues, equipment moving to theater, departure of advance party Soldiers, and genuine

Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) actions. Although units often say these distracters are artificial, these same sorts of issues compete for attention in-theater.

The assistant chief of staff, signal (G-6) for the 416th Theater Engineer Command changed his mind on this when he served in Afghanistan as the chief of staff for the 420th Engineer Brigade. They experienced heightened activity and had 10 percent of Soldiers on leave and the headquarters split between two locations. The MRX helped them get ready.

The main differences between the CPX and MRX are the goals and intensity. The goals of the CPX are for the staff to identify their roles and responsibilities, set up a functioning command post, establish processes for information analysis and dissemination, establish their battle rhythm, validate battle drills, and gain situational awareness by posting relevant information to their common operational picture—for example, battle tracking. These are parallel with opportunities to continue their MDMP training and practice briefing skills.

By the start of the MRX, the basic skills learned in the CPX are in place, and they are polished for eight more days. In addition, the intensity of the exercise increases with more frequent and complex scenario "injects" from the HALSS role players. Key leader engagements and visits with real local national role players challenge and enhance the commander and staff's preparation for their mission downrange.

During the MRX, the TSB trains the brigade commander's personal security detachment (PSD). A series of field events are injected into the exercise. There are multiple opportunities for the brigade design engineer technical section (G-7) to conduct quality control/assurance, recons, surveys, and other engineering tasks outside the wire. These missions provide the opportunity to use the PSD for escort. PSD training includes reacting to numerous attacks and a debriefing with the intelligence staff officer (G-2) upon return. This information becomes part of the G-2's intelligence picture.

For the primary staff officers, the value of the training is obvious in the quality of the products, increased efficiencies developed, and improved briefing skills by the end of the MRX. However, throughout this entire process, whole lists
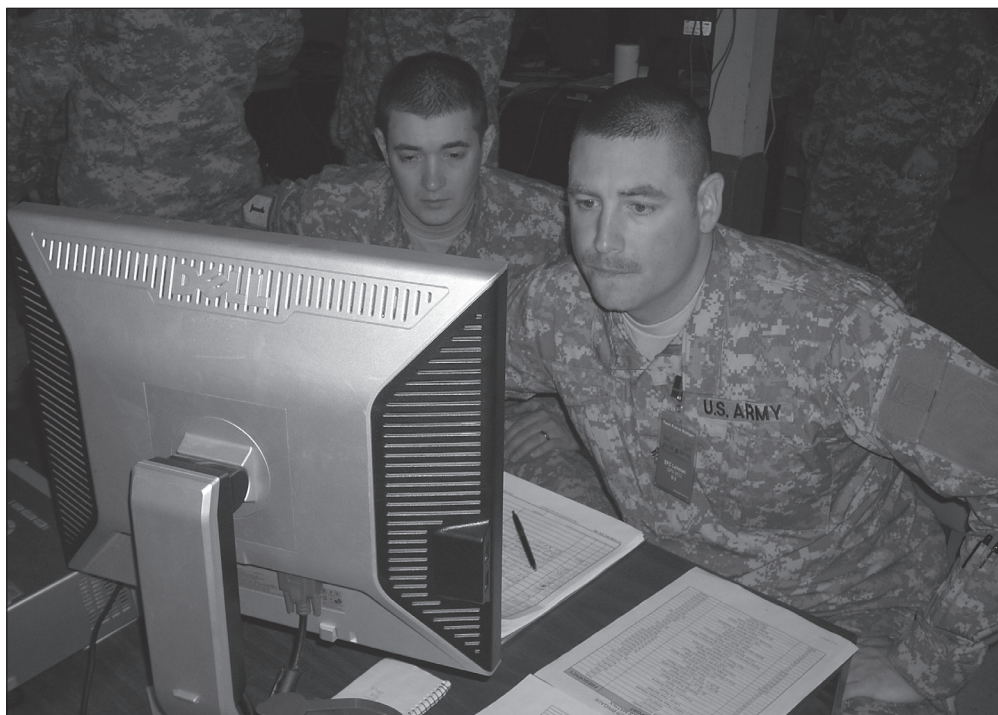
Soldiers conduct a shift change brief during a command post exercise at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin.

of skills are also being sharpened by the enlisted Soldiers, battle staff NCOs, and junior officers, as they develop an effective command post.

Among the most important skills developed is their ability and confidence with Army Battle Command Systems and CPOF. The experience is stressful, but necessary, and Soldiers react positively.

Observer-Controller/Trainers

From the MDMP through the end of the MRX, 3d BCTB and First Army TSBs position observer-controller/trainers (OC/Ts) with each staff section. During the exercise, the OC/Ts do not evaluate as much as they provide feedback based on a combination of Army Doctrine and the Combined Arms Training Strategy (CATS). These three to five tasks (per staff section) are agreed on with the DEF unit in advance. The 3d BCTB believes that a positive relationship between the OC/T and the staff section enhances the training.

In addition, 3d BCTB also uses a tool developed by the former commander of the 4th Cavalry TSB, when he worked on training engineers along with the 3d BCTB early in this present conflict. He called his method of evaluation *staff assessment standards*. In essence, he condensed the doctrine in FM 3-0, FM 5-0, and FM 6-0 into five main areas—time management, staff estimates, common operational picture, information analysis and dissemination, and generating relevant options. If a staff can perform well in these five critical areas, they will work efficiently: *"Each of the five categories relies on staff integration for the section to be efficient. The staff must understand how their section*

affects other sections, and they must understand the purpose and audience of running estimates. The staff must be integrated and have a mutual view of the battlefield and the commander's desired end state to achieve the desired effect; without integration, the staff will lack clarity and unity of effort."[4]

There are multiple opportunities for self-discovery within the staff. Every evening the OC/Ts conduct an informal after action review (AAR) with their staff section, focusing on one or two areas to improve for the next day. The CPX ends with AARs conducted by the 3d BCTB mobile training team chief, and the MRX concludes with an AAR conducted by the TSB commander. The AARs focus on CTOs, what needs fixing, and who is going to fix it. The facilitators strive to maximize the DEF unit's participation and self-discovery.

Challenges

Battle command tasks are common to any field unit, and 3d BCTB can provide BCST under any circumstances. DEF units, however, want a high degree of realism. A challenge for 3d BCTB is having enough engineer officers (with specific theater experience) for all the requirements of an exercise. Three or four engineer OC/Ts are enough to cover down on the engineer brigade's design engineer technical section (G-7) and operations staff section (G-3). That is usually all that the 3d BCTB has available. Unfortunately, that often does not leave many engineer-trained role players who often have to answer technical RFIs for the HALSS cell.

Having a 3d BCTB Soldier on the leader's recon is essential in developing a realistic exercise baseline for the role players. Relationships made on the leader's recon result in prompt turnaround of RFIs. Subject matter experts sent back by the deployed engineer unit (while it is still in-theater) to facilitate the BCST have a huge impact on realism, including expediting accurate answers to RFIs. In reality, this provides a 30-day jump start to the RIP/TOA process.

The 3d BCTB project officer started contacting units (scheduled or expecting to be scheduled for the next rotation) and requested that they send Soldiers forward to observe their predecessors' BCST events. Not only did they learn about the CPX and MRX, but they became an asset for the OC/Ts and HALSS.

The project officer of the 176th Engineer Brigade mission received three members of an engineer battalion command group to role-play themselves in the HALSS during the exercise. It does not get any more real than that. There is a substantial payoff to any unit that participates. They are training themselves and mastering their higher headquarters' standing operating procedure at the same time. One further resource is sending the DEF unit's liaison officers to participate. These engineer officers can work in the HALSS, acting in their real liaison officer function as well as providing an engineer flavor to the role playing.

Conclusion

Creating a BCST event for a deploying engineer unit takes months of preparation and continuous coordination between different entities. The 3d BCTB, along with two TSBs, has trained nine engineer brigades and most of their subordinate battalions in the past five years. Together they have developed an effective model of BCST and have fostered relationships within the engineer community. The essential exercise ingredients boil down to theater realism with recent and relevant classified data and an engineer unit (using staff integration) working on the same issues they will encounter in-theater. Fostering positive relationships between the DEF unit, 3d BCTB, the TSB, the unit in-theater, and the engineer community at large is key to the success of the BCST and the unit's deployment. ♜

Lieutenant Colonel Weaver is a field artillery officer who is currently mobilized and serving in the 3d BCTB, 75th BCTD, Fort Sheridan, Illinois. He was the project officer of both the 420th Engineer Brigade and the 41st Infantry Brigade Combat Team missions. He has executed key roles on ten other brigade and battalion MRXs and was the commander of Service Battery 1/121 Field Artillery, and the S-4, 7th Brigade, 84th Division. As a civilian, he teaches high school chemistry in Racine, Wisconsin. He holds a bachelor's in secondary education broad field science from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and a master's in curriculum and instruction from National Louis University, Evanston, Illinois.

Major Farrell is an engineer officer serving as an OC/T with 2d Battle Command Training Group, 3d BCTB, 75th BCTD, in Fort Sheridan, Illinois. During that time, he has participated in multiple roles, including project officer, HALSS engineer subject matter expert, and OC/T for five engineer brigade BCSTs and five engineer battalion BCSTs as a mobilized Reserve Soldier. Previously, he was the S-3, company commander, a battle captain, and S-1 with the 244th Engineer Battalion in Denver, Colorado. He holds a bachelor's in civil and environmental engineering from Cornell University and owns Castle Engineering Solutions, LLC, a forensic structural engineering consulting firm. He is a licensed professional engineer in Wisconsin and Colorado.

Endnotes

[1]Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, 27 February 2008, p. 5-2.

[2]FM 5-0, *The Operations Process*, 26 March 2010, p. vi.

[3]FM 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, 11 August 2003, Appendix D-9.

[4]Jeffrey R. Sanderson, "4th Cavalry Brigade Staff Assessment Standards," *Armor & Cavalry Journal*, May–June 2008, p.16.